

ROLE OF TALKING BOOKS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON
THE DEMAND OF BRAILLE LITERATURE.

By

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Role of Talking Books and Their Influence on the
Demand of Braille Literature

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Scientific and technical progress is correctly referred to as one of the most important social phenomena of the present time. It has been instrumental in the introduction of unprecedented changes in all fields of human endeavour. Its action is increasingly being extended to the solution of a whole series of matters which concern blind people all over the world.

However, and this is true in any field of activity, the scientific and technical progress becomes a powerful creative force only if social conditions are favourable. Its achievements depend to a large extent on the economic power of society as well as on political and other institutions.

The problems of the blind are deeply social and this is why the role of scientific and technical progress depends entirely on the social policy of a given community.

It is very well known that in the USSR, in the countries of socialist cooperation and in the developed countries of Europe and Asia great achievements have been made in the field of compensation of blindness and in the rehabilitation of the visually handicapped. The energetic action of society, the development of culture and the education of people with scientific progress acting as a thriving factor have banished forever the eternal myth of blindness as a fatal phenomenon characteristic of mankind. In the USSR, the satisfactory solution of some very vital problems of the blind, such

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as the prevention and treatment of eye diseases, employment, the constant improvement of their cultural and educational standard has traditionally been made with the assistance of a close cooperation between scientific knowledge and practical action. An organic connection with scientific organisations for the solution of a wide range of problems relating to the improvement of working and living conditions of blind people and to their vocational training is a distinct feature of the activity of the All Russia Society of the Blind (VOS).

Thus, we can say that scientific and technical progress is a sort of catalyser of the main processes which occur in a given society. This will necessarily influence the nature and methods of the solutions to specific problems of education and integration of the blind.

The problems of the situation of the blind in the age of Science, a difficult and contradictory matter in many aspects, is one of the concerns of the national associations as well as of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind. And this has not happened by chance. Under the current conditions, the question has been posed as follows: Can the collective participation of the blind in the process of social production be in accordance with rapidly changing demands?

So is the dialectic of life. Although all that has been said above has a universal character, it imposes on the social organisations and above all on the organised movement of the blind, the special responsibility of safeguarding the positions already attained, of consolidating and developing them.

The practical results of our work, especially the model of solution of the most vital problem, i.e., the rational employment of the blind, reply positively to this question. Reality shows not only that there is a true correspondence between the possibilities of the blind and the demands of the present time but also that these

possibilities have new perspectives. To achieve this end, a decisive factor is the constant understanding and the increasing support of the state and scientific institutions with regard to the solutions to the development task of the material, technical and professional bases of the All Russia Society of the Blind.

The objective analyses of the development trends of blindness and of the demographic composition of seriously visually impaired people, have permitted this institution to work out new methods for the solution of the tasks relating to the training of blind and partially sighted people bearing in mind current demands. This results in the increasing importance of subjective factors, such as the mobilising role of social organisations - in our case, the All Russia Society of the Blind - and the increasing social activity of blind people themselves. Our association is not only an independent organisation which gives a certain contribution to the national economy but also an important leading centre which has the responsibility of studying, organising coordinating, consulting and assimilating the work carried out in practically every field of the social and vocational rehabilitation as well as of placement in employment.

Social activity, implies for every expert in any branch of production, science and culture, a sense of responsibility of the task he has been assigned and an understanding of the need to improve constantly the standard of professional knowledge and knowhow.

The availability of books is a great benefit for contemporary mankind. Society acts in a humanitarian way by giving blind people access to the treasures of human genius. There is a growing need of acquiring concise information. This general phenomenon deriving from the information explosion and the increase of the cost of the time necessary to obtain new data demands from the national organisations, the application of better methods in the vocational training and the improvement

of social and cultural services for the blind.

Scientific and technical progress has presented the blind with the tape recorder and talking books. The availability of talking books meant that for the first time after the creation of the marvellous system of Louis Braille, blind people had received a second means offering them the possibility of working independently with a book. This has given birth to a whole series of new and rather complex tasks. In this paper we will deal with the mutual dependence of two types of books.

All the discussions on the supposed opposition between braille and talking books should be considered as mere sophistries.

Both types of books exist and develop in a parallel way.

The book in braille or in talking book form is one of the most important means of getting information about reality, of obtaining and exchanging vocational skills as well as scientific and cultural values. Books, besides being a mass medium of information, offer to society an immense possibility considering their variety and power to influence both the individual and the community as a whole.

We are going to study some development trends of the two types of books for the blind. Each kind has its own specific features. Both are defined above all by the nature of the perception involved and by their efficiency and comfort of manipulation.

The application to vocational and study purposes becomes one of the most important trends in the development of embossed books. Today it is undeniable that not all books can be perceived by listening. In order to carry out a serious scientific study, it is necessary to know how to work independently with a book. Blind people can acquire this skill thanks to the braille book. There



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has been an increasing availability of books for blind people engaged in different fields of intellectual work. There is a growing number of publications relating to Sociology and Politics and scientific books designed for the general public as well as reference books and dictionaries. The publication of periodicals in braille does not decrease either.

Libraries for the blind have an excellent stock of Russian and world classics as well as of contemporary foreign and Soviet authors. In 1977 the stock of books in the libraries for the blind, in the Russian Federal Socialist Soviet Republic only, amounted to 1,350,000, including records. (All the figures mentioned in this report refer exclusively to the above-mentioned republic.) More than half of this stock consists, as above, of books in braille. However, the proportion of braille books in the total stock is decreasing considerably. The proportion of talking books is increasing.

In the following table we show a comparison of the distribution of book stocks according to the type of book and the proportion of each type in relation to the total stock of 1974-1977.

Type of book	1974		1976	
	number of copies (thousands)	% in relation to the total stock	number of copies (thousands)	% in relation to the total stock
Books in braille	1643.5	54.1	1759.9	50.2
Talking books	810.5	26.6	970.8	27.8
Ink print books	582.6	19.2	703.1	20.0

We can make the following remarks concerning these figures: in two years the number of books in braille has increased 6.5% and that of talking books 7.5%. The increase in the number of books in ordinary print of 21% is due not only to the presence of a certain number of sighted readers but also to the increasing demand from the blind themselves.

This same pattern can be observed in the analysis of the data concerning the loaning of books in libraries.

In spite of the increase of the absolute indexes relating to stocks and loaning of braille books, it is possible to see a clear trend towards a decrease in the demand of such books. This undoubtedly influences the number of copies printed in each edition. If we take the 1971 editions of braille books as a basis for comparison, in 1977 they represented 90% and this year they do not exceed 78%.

Our experience shows that the period of initial accumulation is rather quick. The basic stock of talking books has been completed for almost all the branches of knowledge. Its development has started a stage of regular increase of book stocks on the basis of more specific topics within the general subjects. We must point out that the subject trends will be constantly corrected as methods and quality of recording are improved and with further development of duplication techniques.

In 1977 the total stock of talking book libraries amounted to 2,200 titles, of which 80% corresponded to fiction, and approximately 20% to literature on Sociology and Politics, text books and scientific books designed for the general public.

If the recording of talking books amounted to 3,200 hours in 1970, in 1977 it equalled 3,650. These figures show that there is an increase in the production of recorded literature. In terms of edition sheets, the



figures just mentioned amount to 4,000 and 4,562.2.

Talking books according to the demand from readers are produced in two quantities of copies. The small quantity is equal to 150-170 copies of each title and the large one 250-270. All the books are distributed to libraries for the blind.

The tape-recorder, despite its degree of perfection, enslaves man and transforms him into a "dumb" worshipper. Technical whims do not disturb man but rather annoy him when there is a forced interruption of reading. All the same, the demand of talking books is rapidly increasing. Their mean circulation is eight times larger than that of braille books.

The recording of books on tape undoubtedly has some advantages. The broadcasting of talking books in special factories for the blind, and the listening of talking books at home which generally becomes a collective reading session of all members of the family, are factors which have an enormous educative value. The advantage of the talking books is that they are read by great artists, and qualified radio announcers. This produces a great moral and esthetic satisfaction, and increases the emotional and educative effects on man.

Moreover, recorded books have some advantages in comparison to braille with regard to their weight and size. Talking books can be easily carried and stored.

The facts are clear. The talking book has had for a long time a leading position. What are the prospects of these two types of books in the world of literature for the blind? Does this imply that a progressive abandonment of braille is taking place?

In the Soviet Union the talking book has had a great impulse for the last twenty years. Blind people receive tape-recorders at reduced prices or free of charge. The



talking book does not require any of the physical or intellectual efforts necessary for the assimilation of braille.

The talking book has rapidly attracted a great number of visually handicapped persons to reading. The overwhelming majority of these people are invalids of the second group (partially sighted), who do not know braille.

Statistics show that the increase in the number of blind people is only due to the inclusion of adults who have lost their sight as a consequence of disease or injury, and whose sense of touch is very poor because of their age.

In the Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic out of the 205,000 registered blind people, 43,000 know braille, i.e., 1,900 people less than in 1974.

Blindness among children has reached in our country its lowest record. From 0 to 7 years, it represents 0.2% and from 7 to 16, 2.1%. On the other hand, the number of blind people sixty years and older represents a 46.5% of the total population of registered blind people.

Most of the schools for the blind have practically become schools for partially sighted.

All this has directly influenced the readers' demands as far as libraries for the blind are concerned. In 1977, out of the 143,000 readers (of these 21,000 were sighted), 28,300 people read books in braille, i.e., 65% of those who know the system. 80,000 people have listened to talking books. In relation to 1974 the number of listeners of talking books has increased almost by 12,000.

That is the evolution of braille and talking books with the background of the social processes that influence it.

As far as the abandonment of braille is concerned, it is a problem that lies beyond the limits of this paper and which needs an urgent and thorough analysis. In any case, we are not at all convinced that the system of Louis Braille is completing its historic mission. No, this should not be taken as a narrow conservatism. A sense of deep conviction compels us to say: the possibilities of this system are far from being fully exploited. It will only become history when blindness has disappeared.

We think that the practical solution of the tasks of the rehabilitation and education of the blind, bearing in mind the specific demands of present time, should be supported by a deep knowledge of the peculiarities of each category of blind people, peculiarities which are even more varied than the ones one can observe among sighted people.

Considering the specific character of this work due to differences resulting from the onset of blindness, the nature and degree of visual impairment, the compensation task for the various categories of blind people has to be conducted in different ways utilising the most appropriate means for each category.

This is why the success of the work will increasingly depend on the improvement of all the systems and methods used in the training of blind people for a useful and remunerative life based on the achievements of scientific and technical progress and of social development.

The maximum utilisation of educational guidance and of the compensation potentials of the braille system as well as of tape recorders and other technical means, are some of the challenges derived from the present state of development.

From a practical viewpoint the main feature of the development prospects of both types of literature for the blind is a stronger specialisation of publications in accordance with the reader demands and with psychological

and educational recommendations made by the scientists. The methodical, technical and typographical improvement of each type of book production is very important. We also are aware of the objective need to conduct further research to find new methods which could make possible a combination of both types of literature, offering the blind the chance to have at their disposal a book using the two systems, i.e., braille and recorded, taking into account the perceptive potentials of both braille and talking books as well as their information possibilities. The creation of such books, for instance for handbooks and textbooks, for those who learn a foreign language is entirely feasible and does not require any additional expenses.

In many countries, including the Soviet Union, studies are being conducted along these lines. The international exchange in this field will contribute in our opinion to the promotion of our common cause.

All that has been said so far confirms the view that braille and talking books are natural allies, which are destined to develop and complement each other. Since the tape-recorder is a remarkable achievement of scientific and technical progress, it has become a device liable to be humanised, as they said in England. Now we are witnessing the birth of new discoveries and inventions for the blind. The optacon and other reading machines still have a long way to go before they become media as efficient, reliable and easily accessible as their brother the tape-recorder.

For more than a century, braille has been the only instrument available to the blind to get to know life in an independent manner, to penetrate in the world of human treasures and to prepare them to lead a useful life. Nowadays scientific and technical progress is broadening the possibilities of the blind to become independent, and it contributes to the process of their adjustment and integration in society. The community is becoming more and more aware not only of its responsibility but also of

the interest in solving the current problems of the blind.

In conclusion, I wish to make the following proposal for the final resolution: to consider that the combination and development of traditional and new methods for an independent access to information are important pre-requirements for the successful integration of the blind in present society. To achieve this end, it is essential to obtain an increasing moral and material support in order to solve the present problems of the blind taking into account the demands of scientific and technical progress.

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